

Welcome to COYOTE 0

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INTERCULTURAL LEARNING Methodological developments in intercultural learning through language

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The idea for this article grew out of work being done on the language courses of the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg. There are six languages taught on this programme, English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, and each course is delivered in its host country. Some countries have more than one course each year. The courses are four weeks long and are aimed at youth leaders and young workers in INGYOs and NGOs. Depending on the course, they have 20-30 participants on them at a time. One of these courses takes place at Thames Valley University, London.

The courses have a history going back over 30 years. Since 1989 the major theme of these courses has been intercultural learning based on the following objectives:

- To offer a different way of learning a language.
- To enable members of INGYOs to become more active in international youth work in an increasingly multicultural world.
- To enable participants to learn a language while learning from each other and working together in an international group in order to develop intercultural awareness and communication.
- To enable participants to experience different realities of youth, youth work and (international) youth organisations and also to exchange ideas and views.
- To enable participants to experience the political economic, social and cultural realities of the host country, region and town.
- To foster intercultural attitudes which will break down barriers of prejudice and intolerance in greater Europe and the world. (1996 Programme Documentation; doc. CEJ/G (95) 8).

The intercultural learning dimension of the language courses is now very well established and considerable experience of applying an ICL methodology has been built up. In order to exploit this knowledge and to exchange ideas about the future of ICL, the EYC decided to convene a training course in intercultural learning

through language. This took place in 1998 in Strasbourg from 10-15 November.

The course was aimed at people involved in youth training programmes at a European level (trainers, language teachers, language course directors, youth work professionals). It was also attended by members of the European Voluntary Service. They made a very positive contribution to the course. This training course was also the first in a new partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission. In all the course was attended by 36 people. This included three guest speakers and five facilitators.

On the following pages we will briefly describe what the training course was like and then move on to explain what intercultural learning means for us. We will then suggest how it might be introduced on a language [\(1\)](#) course. As part of this we will be introducing the concept of ethnography.

The training course

The 1998 training course started with some theoretical background to intercultural learning through language. [\(2\)](#)

The underlying ethos of the work of the European Youth Centre, which is laid down in the objectives of the language courses, set the scene. Interactive workshops were organised to exchange ideas in the areas of methodologies and materials. Participants also went through a number of simulations which led to discussions on attitude, integration, communication, language and social constructs. This was followed by working groups that were given the job of producing materials. These "Production Units" worked on five key areas: programme and course preparation, materials development, communication, teaching and learning styles, and preparation of participants for the European Voluntary Service.

Intercultural learning

The methodological organisation of an course on intercultural learning through language has four basic parameters. The first of these are the professional needs and interests of the participants, all of whom are either youth leaders or youth workers. From these come the topics to be covered on the course and these in turn provide the basis for the tasks on the course. The fourth and final parameter permeates the other three. It is intercultural learning.

Intercultural learning is not easy to define. We, the authors of this article, take a view of intercultural learning which is premised on the belief that culture is not monolithic. What we mean by this is that it is not something which is lying out there in society waiting to be dissected and examined. Rather it is a set of largely unwritten rules which are constantly and subtly changing. From the time they are born people learn how these rules operate through a long and complex process of socialisation. These rules shape our view of the world in terms of our attitudes, beliefs and the meanings we give to things.

The key point in all this is that in our view the building blocks which make up a person's cultural reality are socially constructed. They are not innate. If cultural norms are socially constructed, then what we as individuals take to be normal and appropriate behaviour in a particular context is in reality just one of several equally normal and appropriate modes of behaviour depending on the cultural context in question.

Because we have been socialised to behave in ways which are considered normal and appropriate, it is very easy to assume that our way of doing something is better, more sensible or logical than the way people from other cultures or social groups do the same thing. A good example is eating. Is it better to eat with a knife and fork or with your hands? We, the writers, would argue that it is neither better nor worse, it is just different.

Intercultural learning for us operates on a number of levels. It means learning about similarities and differences in the way individuals from different backgrounds operate. It means participating in the multicultural group. It also means focusing on the particular rather than the general. That is why in our approach we look at the everyday life of participants. This might include things like morning washing rituals, having dinner with the family, eating in a restaurant, smoking a cigarette, buying a stamp, standing on a crowded train, buying a round of drinks in a bar or asking the time.

The experience of the individual is valued because it avoids the cultural reductionism which results in unhelpful generalisations and stereotyping. Effective intercultural learning depends on participants being willing to entertain the notion that cultural reality is socially constructed, i.e. that their norms are very possibly other people's peculiarities. If they can accept this idea, they immediately move away from the tendency to make comparisons using their own culture as a yardstick. This tendency on some language and culture courses can give rise to unhelpful and misleading generalisations about races of people.

- English people are cold.
- Italians eat a lot of pasta.
- Spaniards are hot-blooded.
- Russians are very serious.

These are stereotypes because they generalise about reality and oversimplify it. Not all English people are cold and even those who may be described this way are not like this all of the time.

Implementing intercultural learning through language on a language course

If you want to introduce intercultural learning through language on a language course it is worth considering that intercultural learning can happen in two main ways. The first is not so effective and is known as incidental intercultural learning. The second is very effective and is known as systematic intercultural learning. Our goal is to make intercultural learning as systematic as possible.

Incidental intercultural learning occurs via the intercultural dynamic of the multinational group. In other words it occurs because of the fact of the multinational character of the group where people are living and working together.

One aspect of this is that participants working with other participants employ communication strategies which they view as normal and appropriate for the purposes of successful communication. In doing so, each participant is involved in a process of negotiation with the communication strategies of the other participants.

This process raises their awareness of how other group members operate and is integral to the communicative exchange. But although it is integral, intercultural learning is not an explicit part of it. No one is explicitly saying *"Hey, let's look at what is happening here"*. Because of this, incidental intercultural learning can lead to misunderstandings and possibly reinforce or create negative stereotyping. This will not always be the case, but it is worth being aware of it all the same.

A concrete example of how this might happen would be two participants from different countries discussing a topic like youth unemployment. Let's call them Juana and Mircea. Juana notices that Mircea dominates the conversation and never lets her finish what she wants to say. He interrupts a lot. For his part, Mircea thinks that Juana does not have much to say and so carries on talking. He also wonders why she sometimes seems to run out of things to say.

What may be happening is that where Mircea comes from the signal, usually a pause, that you have finished what you have to say and are ready for someone else to interject is much shorter than it is in the social environment that Juana is accustomed to. So when he stops talking and Juana does not say anything, he thinks he has paused long enough, decides that she has got nothing to say and just carries on.

Neither Juana nor Mircea are focusing on this aspect of their exchange, but they are aware that there is something intercultural happening. It is incidental intercultural learning. But what are they learning? Juana and Mircea may go away with negative impressions of one another. Juana thinking that Mircea is rude and he thinking that she is boring.

Systematic intercultural learning, on the other hand, aims to avoid the pitfalls of incidental intercultural learning by making explicit what is happening in such social events. It involves things like simulation games and discussion groups, reflection and analysis. It means stopping and asking yourself why something is happening in the way it is. It could be as simple as observing someone smoking a cigarette and asking yourself why the smoker is holding the cigarette in a particular way; or just thinking about the expression on his or her face.

When conflicts arise, and they often do in the complex dynamic of a multicultural group, it is worth stopping and saying *"OK, what is happening here? What is stopping us from organising this thing? Why is communication breaking down?"* Such conflicts are often the result of different expectations of what is normal in particular situations. It could be a discussion, a conversation, a group activity or the election of a group representative.

In systematic intercultural learning we are trying to make participants more aware of:

- themselves
- the personal socio-cultural backgrounds (social realities) of the other participants
- the differences between their social realities and the social realities of other participants
- the differences between their social realities and the social realities of the members of the local

community where the course takes place

To encourage participants to look at life in terms of social realities and to see how these realities are socially constructed to seem normal it is useful to try to get them to imagine an every day occurrence like a family dinner or travelling to work by bus and to analyse it in detail from the perspective of an outsider. This can be very revealing of social attitudes and social rituals in the participant's own social environment.

On a course on intercultural learning through language participants are already outsiders, but if they can accept how their own realities can be viewed as strange, then the realities they experience in the group and in the local community where the course is taking place can be investigated from a very different perspective to that common to many language and cultural studies courses. This investigative perspective is known as ethnography and is a form of intercultural awareness raising.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the study of how people operate in their everyday lives and an ethnographer is a participant-observer in different social realities.

The participant-observer leaves his or her own social environment to become a participant and an observer of a different social environment with its attendant social realities. By participating and observing in these real social contexts the ethnographer tries to make sense of what is experienced and also to understand why it makes sense to the participants being observed.

The participant-observer as ethnographer involves trying to find out how all the different perspectives within a given social setting make sense. He/She should try to discover what people do in a given social setting, why people do this thing and how it makes sense in a broader social context. This can form the basis for a series of tasks and projects which investigate the life of the multicultural group and of the local community where the course takes place. The foreign language of the course is the vehicle by which happens.

These findings can then be examined within wider conceptual frameworks such as gender, power, food rituals, social distance, the family, national identity, group identity and so on. These can lead to discussions which raise intercultural awareness. We believe that this kind of ethnographic awareness raising is very useful for investigating the dynamic of the multicultural group and many of the social aspects of the community where the course takes place. We hope you will too.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) The ideas on ethnography and culture expressed here owe a lot to the work of Celia Roberts.

(2) We say *through language* because for us the most important aspect of the courses of the European Youth Centres is intercultural learning. Language, whether it is French, German, English or Russian is the vehicle by which this occurs.